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A Plea in Behalf of Liberty of Conscience

1856

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1726.

A P L E A

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IN BEHALF OF

LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE,

ADDRESSED ESPECIALLY TO

THOSE IN AUTHORITY IN THE SEVERAL GOVERNMENTS
OF EUROPE.

FROM THE

YEARLY MEETING

OF THE

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS,

HELD IN LONDON, 1856.

LONDON:

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FROM THE
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February 3, 1942

A P L E A, &c.

WHILST various questions are occupying the attention of our own countrymen in connection with the removal of the remaining trammels upon liberty of conscience in Great Britain, and whilst, in different parts of the Continent of Europe, so much still exists which is inconsistent with true religious freedom, we deem it a duty briefly to set before our fellow-professors of the name of Christ, and especially before those in authority, what we believe to be the great principles of the Gospel of our Divine Redeemer on this important subject.

That conscience should be free, and that in matters of religious doctrine and worship man is accountable only to God, are truths which are plainly declared in the New Testament, and confirmed by the whole scope of the Gospel, and by the example of our Lord and his disciples. The command "Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's," points at the true limits of the civil power. The emphatic query of the Apostles Peter and John, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (put, as it was, as a sufficient reason for disobeying an express command of the Council at Jerusalem to refrain from preaching the then new truths of the Gospel), is a practical illustration what those limits are. And, on the other hand, the language of the Apostle Paul, addressed to the converts in Rome, even under such a prince as Nero, shows plainly that, in purely civil matters, the Christian is to be subject to the civil authorities, and consequently that liberty of conscience is not to be used as an excuse for anything that is inconsistent with our duty to our

neighbour, or with our peaceable subjection to law and order in things secular. "Rulers," says he, "are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake."

How beautifully does the harmony between true liberty of conscience in things pertaining to God, and true obedience to the magistrate in things pertaining to civil government, appear from a comparison of these texts! How clear, again, is the evidence furnished by other passages in the Evangelists, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation, and by the conduct of the early Christians even after the Apostles' days, that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is not of this world, and is not to be advanced by the sword; and that, in matters of faith, we are not to yield our convictions to political authority, nor to shape our conduct by the wisdom or decisions of the princes of this world; that we are even to suffer wrong and take it patiently; and that the blessing of Him whom we call Master and Lord rests not upon the persecutors, but upon those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Neither is there any authority whatever throughout the New Testament which justifies the Civil Government in inflicting temporal punishments on the professors of one particular creed, in respect only of their religious opinions, or in bestowing, on the like grounds, temporal emoluments on the professors of another.

When the disciples would have called down fire from heaven to consume those who would not receive their Lord,

He pronounced the emphatic reproof "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." How conclusively does this example, from which there can be no appeal, condemn not only the cruel fires of the Middle Ages, but even the milder forms of persecution which modern times have substituted for them. The characteristic feature of the Gospel is mercy: its weapons are not carnal, but spiritual: its arguments are not those of force, but of persuasion and of love. To the Christian, whatever be his rank or influence amongst men, no means can be lawful, in the support or advancement of religion, which are inconsistent with the meekness and the gentleness of his Lord.

We plead for no license to do wrong: we advocate no weak indulgence to the workings of unbridled imagination or passion: we plead for liberty of conscience toward God. To rule over the conscience, and to command the spiritual allegiance of his creatures, is his high and sacred prerogative. To prohibit by law the doing of that which conscience enjoins as a religious duty, and which in no wise interferes with the just requirements of civil order, is to assume a jurisdiction for which the Supreme Judge has given no warrant under the Gospel: whilst, to enforce the performance of services, under the plea of religion, upon those who believe such services to be uncalled for, or for them even positively sinful, must surely be highly offensive to a pure and holy God. In religion every act ought to be free: a forced worship is plainly a contradiction in terms under that dispensation under which, according to the declaration of our Lord himself, they that worship the Father "must worship Him in spirit and in truth." And in our apprehension every assembly which is held, with open doors, for the sole purpose of the public worship of God, ought to be free from all interruption or molestation, and is entitled to the protection of the civil power.

A firm yet peaceable protest against the exercise of authority by man over his fellow man, in the things of God, was a part of that noble testimony which our forefathers, at the rise of our Society in the seventeenth century, believed themselves called, under the influence and teaching of the Spirit of Truth, to bear to primitive Christianity in its purity and in its power. Their clear yet simple views hereon, and their bold and patient endurance of persecution as British subjects, together with their example in carrying out these principles, when they were themselves possessed of authority in the Jerseys and Pennsylvania, contributed, we believe, in no small degree to the obtaining of that large measure of freedom of conscience which we have now gratefully to acknowledge as existing in this country as well as in North America. Their steadfast adherence, in simple trust in God, to what they believed to be his law, and their submission to the civil authority when this did not interfere with their obedience to Him, under his blessing made way with their rulers. Laws were enacted by the British Legislature which mitigated the penal code and increased their civil rights; and Statutes have successively been passed which have secured to our Society numerous privileges, amongst which may be enumerated the undisturbed exercise of public worship according to our conscience; perfect legal validity for marriages solemnized conformably to our own usages; complete effect to our affirmation, as a substitute for an oath, in all cases, whether of evidence or of qualification for office; and a great mitigation of the law in reference to military service and ecclesiastical claims.

It is our conviction—a conviction which is, we submit, abundantly confirmed by the past history and present condition of Great Britain and of the other nations of Europe—that the thorough maintenance of the principles of true liberty of conscience greatly contributes to the temporal as

well as the spiritual welfare of nations. It promotes the increase among them of the number of upright and faithful subjects and citizens,—men fearing God and discharging their various duties to his glory, and to the benefit of their country. These are the men who are the real strength of the Government under which they live, and who afford a security to the State which nothing else can equally confer.

Seeing, then, that these things are so, we commend our Plea to the candid and serious acceptance of all into whose hands it may come. In that love which would embrace all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, we cannot but mourn that there are any of our fellow Christians, of whatever denomination, who, though innocent of any crime and clear of all political movements and aims, are nevertheless still suffering for conscience sake, in different parts of Europe, simply because their religious faith differs from that of the State. In some instances they are members of Churches to which their ancestors have belonged for several successive generations ; in others, they have been themselves brought, on conviction, to a change of religious profession, and to adopt views different from those of their education, but, as they believe, more in accordance with the revealed will of God. Our sympathy is awakened for many of these sincere-hearted believers in Christ, strangers to us and not connected with us in outward religious profession : we feel deeply for them, and for all who suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. Would it not be matter of just reproach, if, after Christian Potentates have unitedly pleaded the cause of religious freedom with the Mahomedans, any who profess the name of Christ should continue, under colour of law or otherwise, to persecute their fellow Christians, whether within the limits of the Eastern or of the Western church, or in any of the Protestant states ? And how must such things weaken an

appeal to Heathen or Mahomedan princes in behalf of the rights of conscience !

We would therefore respectfully, but earnestly, plead with all those in authority in the different nations of professing Christendom, imploring them to carry forward, with true wisdom and courage, the work of legal amelioration in all that pertains to religious liberty. May you perceive, and act upon the conviction, that it is not less your interest than your duty to remove from your jurisprudence all the remaining shackles that oppress conscience, whether those shackles consist of restraints upon public worship, of punishments for religious dissent, of imposts for the support of religious observances and establishments, levied on those who conscientiously object to them, or of interference with the celebration of their marriages, the burial of their dead, or the religious training of their offspring. And, seeing that our Heavenly Father has given a revelation of his will to man, in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, may no human authority presume to interfere with that free access to them which is the sacred right of all men. May you in these things, and in all that concerns the government of those over whom, by the providence of Almighty God, you are placed in authority, remember your accountableness to Him, the Supreme Ruler of the Universe ; and, doing unto others as you would that they should do unto you, and seeking to rule in the fear of the Lord and in dependance upon the wisdom and strength which come from Him, may you experience his blessing to rest upon you and upon your respective countries.

Signed in and on behalf of the Meeting,
JOSEPH THORP,
Clerk to the Meeting this year.

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